

Beyond Scouting for Food

Filling Stomachs, Hearts at North Dakota Pantry

Food drives like Scouting for Food have long been among the BSA's most popular service projects. Few Scouts, however, give much thought to how all the cans of green beans and vegetable soup they collect actually get to people in need.

That's where Spencer Coffman comes in. As client services manager at the Emergency Food Pantry in Fargo, N.D., the 2007 Eagle Scout is responsible for distributing nearly a million pounds of food to some 47,500 people in need each year. He began volunteering at the pantry a couple of years ago. When the previous manager retired in May 2014, he was strongly encouraged to apply for the job. "They basically said, 'Bring in your application or don't come back,'" he says half-jokingly.

In his job, Coffman coordinates the work of more than 1,500 volunteers a year, including regular volunteers, church groups and schoolchildren. He strives to keep everyone happy, which means keeping them busy.

Coffman's volunteers unpack cases, sort donations, rotate the pantry's supplies and stock the line where donations are distributed. Under the pantry's choice model, they also serve as personal shoppers for clients, who get to choose from a menu of available items — canned goods, produce, dairy products and more. "It's just like shopping at a grocery store, but for free," Coffman says. "And it's done for them."



Coffman, who has bachelor's degrees in psychology and philosophy from Minnesota State University, enjoys talking with clients and hearing their stories. He's quick to point out, however, that his job is to share food, not advice.

That said, he knows that he's doing more than just feeding people. "If you're hungry, you're not going to be focused on getting a job," he says. "If we can satisfy their hunger, we may be a crucial step in getting them a job." 

